



# INTERFAITH Today

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A journal for all faiths, and all people of faith.

## Unlocking the Hearts of the Prisoners: Ministry in Prisons

By Reverend Mara Leigh "Coach" Taylor

Anyone in pastoral work will agree that one of the greatest rewards is to witness the light of hope ignite in the heart of an individual who might have remained lost without lovingly supportive words chosen specifically for them. Witnessing this rare moment of epiphany, when the light of the Divine is truly visible in another human being, is often the single driving force for many people to begin a ministry. Often pastoral workers are answering their own internal call to be of service, to have their life matter to someone beyond themselves. A unique, and yet often overlooked, group of eager potential spiritualists are the 2.3 million men, women and children behind bars in our nation's county jails and state, federal, and immigration prisons.



Often referred to as "Chaplains," the spiritual leaders who guide the incarcerated individual to greater religious insight frequently refer to their work as deep and rich. They will tell you of their own spiritual growth stemming from serving those whose lives have stopped still long enough for them to actually listen to an alternative way to perceive life and living. Prior to their incarceration, the individuals behind bars have often drifted far from living a spiritual life, or have never experienced anything more than the chaos which comes from a societal and familial structure which fails to support core human values. More than 80 percent of our nation's prisoners have a drug or alcohol related crime for which they are now paying the price of relinquishing their physical freedom. In their newfound sobriety behind bars, these individuals are often open to experiencing life from a more subtle perspective. And, absent the ability to move about freely, inmates are off the consumerism train long enough to read books, write letters, and attend meetings and services. What I have learned in serving the incarcerated is that the things we, who have our physical freedom, are encouraged to collect and value are material things that, in the big picture, simply do not matter. Life is not about "things," but we forget that as we strive for more, bigger, better. In pastoral work with the incarcerated I recognize my problems are "luxury problems" and problems of inconvenience. This truly is felt on the day when a detained woman returns to her 8 foot by 12 foot cell from court. She has been sentenced to five years in prison. The five years in prison she could handle well enough, but the length of her term means her children, who are in foster care, will most likely be adopted-out to someone who is able to care for their daily needs. The breaking of a mother's heart, losing her children as a result of her drug or alcohol-induced illegal activity, is a real problem. Serving the incarcerated is, for me, a constant reminder of the fragility of the human heart. In serving the incarcerated I have come to appreciate everything, especially my freedom.

I have also come to a deep spirituality which could not have existed with any other form of service. And I collect less things and avoid television and the requisite commercials. For ministers interested in serving the detained, there are some main concerns: 1) Distance to travel, 2) Role or title of your ministry, 3) Access to inmates, 4) Establishing support and networking.

### Distance to travel

Prisons and jails are often not as close as the nearest church or school. Distance of travel can impact your frequency of service. Do a little research and you will discover the nearest prisons and jails. Researching local jails and prisons in your area is as easy as an internet search or a call to the local sheriff's department or state department of corrections, or an online search of Federal Bureau of Prisons for the federal prison closest to you.

### Role or title of your ministry

Does the prison or jail closest to you have a formal Chaplaincy program? Becoming a chaplain is the most reliable and most consistent route to access work with inmates. While most county jail chaplains are volunteers, prisons at the state and federal level have paid chaplains on staff. Some questions to ask are: How might you qualify for a paid or unpaid position? Does the facility welcome faith-based services? How might you get started? There are a variety of programs which offer online education and ordination and through which you can obtain status as a chaplain. These programs vary by degree, length, type of faith, and cost.

For instance, the Love Church Worldwide offers an interfaith program with both a Basic Chaplain Certification track, for individuals wishing to offer volunteer services, and an Advanced Chaplain Certification, for those aiming to become a professional chaplain. The Esoteric Theological Seminary, on the other hand, merely requires a biography of one's personal spiritual history and description of how obtaining ordination as a minister will benefit one's work or life, and a one-time tuition fee of \$150. Once those items are submitted along with an application, a certificate of ordination by the Esoteric Interfaith Church is sent to the applicant and they are legally able to practice in all 50 states.

For a more in-depth educational foundation, Liberty University offers several degree programs ranging from the Associate to the Doctoral level.

Finally, the School for Correctional Ministries offers a mostly online, part-time program through Wheaton College in Illinois that is intended for professionals and volunteers who desire to serve in prisons, jails, and reentry programs. The curriculum is designed to be completed in one year and offers specialized training with an emphasis in the areas of correctional chaplaincy, reentry ministry, and correctional ministry.

### Access to inmates

If your access to inmates is denied due to a perceived lack of inmate interest in interfaith study, there are other options.

Offering a meditation class, a yoga class, a spiritual book club or other spiritually focused class or group is oftentimes a way to offer something which has immediate appeal. This usually requires a short written proposal which ultimately ends up on the prison warden's desk for approval. For my own work, I began volunteering as a "relaxation class" instructor prior to completing seminary studies and becoming an interfaith minister. My work with inmates expanded and required additional structure in the form of a non-profit organization to support my work and the work of volunteers working with me. As a result, my ministry has been housed by the organization I founded, *Getting Out By Going In*. Rather than becoming a chaplain, non-profits can support ministers who represent the goals and objectives of the organization, as in the case of *Getting Out By Going In* and my work with inmates.

### Gain support through networking

The final way to learn more about the opportunities to serve our Nation's incarcerated is to ask someone who is currently in service. Networking with other individuals or organizations currently serving an incarcerated population will get you included in a group of individuals who consistently meet similar challenges and experience similar rewards. Building your data base of reputable organizations and individuals will aid you when you experience the inevitable "push back" from institutions who find it inconvenient to accommodate inmate spiritual studies. Working inside prisons and jails with individuals who have "lost it all" is a rare opportunity to serve individuals who may choose to shed a prior lifestyle and embrace a new way of living. I began my own journey of serving the detained and incarcerated nearly nine years ago. I can say, without a doubt, it is through my work in prisons and jails that I found my own internal freedom, or, rather, consistently increasing levels of internal freedom. And it is through my service to these individuals that I have altered my perceptions of what is important, which in and of itself is quite freeing. For those who are persistent enough to find the small window of opportunity to serve prisoners, there are many hearts just waiting to be unlocked, and the joy of the experience surpasses all explanation.

Reverend Mara Leigh "Coach" Taylor is the founder of *Getting Out By Going In*, a non-profit organization dedicated to the self-education and spiritual growth of the more than 2.3 million incarcerated men, women and children in the United States of America. She is an interfaith minister with a focus on promoting internal freedom through increased spirituality and perceptual shifts. She has authored the book, *Women in Prison: Women Finding Freedom*, to help incarcerated women begin the journey inward.

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